

The Kingdom of Faithful Men

Matt 8:1-22

Creekside Community Church, San Leandro, California

Greg V. Arthur, July 30, 2017

Matt 8:8-11 - ⁸ The centurion answered and said, "Lord, I am not worthy that You should come under my roof. But only speak a word, and my servant will be healed. ⁹ For I also am a man under authority, having soldiers under me. And I say to this one, 'Go,' and he goes; and to another, 'Come,' and he comes; and to my servant, 'Do this,' and he does it." ¹⁰ When Jesus heard it, He marveled, and said to those who followed, "Assuredly, I say to you, I have not found such great faith, not even in Israel!"

The Real Thing

Good morning Creekside, I'm Greg Arthur, one of the pastors here and I will be speaking to you today. I've entitled today's message, "The Kingdom of Faithful Men." This is a title that immediately leads to a question fundamental to why we are here: What is faith? Who is the faithful man or woman? And why would being faithful be important? Why do these old churchy people go on and on about this abstraction called faith? Besides LeBron talking about 'faith in my teammates,' or 'faith in myself,' and maybe some stiff NPR commentator talking about 'faith in the international monetary fund,' who else even talks about faith?

What is faith exactly? Is it a feeling, a thought, an action, a long epic poem of the soul? Is it external and outward, or internal and inward? And faith isn't anything without an object of faith, so what does it mean to have faith in someone or something? Maybe more to the point, is the question: What is Christ the King looking for when He says we must have faith in Him? My hope is that we'll clearly hear what He has to say about this today, for our passage is about real and counterfeit faith, strong and weak faith, and about faith in Christ being the most important, most meaningful, and entirely necessary aspect of human life. My hope is we'll not only clearly hear what faith in Him is but we'll respond, for, as it says in the scriptures, "*man does not live by bread alone but by every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God,*"¹

So, what does God say about the real thing, about real faith in Him, about those who are faithful in Him, who although having no righteousness of their own, are made righteous because of this real faith in Him.² You might remember the old Coca-Cola song, "It's the Real Thing," ... in the back of your mind, what you're hoping to find, it's the Real Thing. It was one of the most effective ads ever because the song gets to the heart of the matter. In their case it was just Coca-Cola, but in our case regarding faith in Christ, we need to have the real thing, faith in Christ, so that we are the Real Thing, the faithful people of His Kingdom.

So, if I may venture, I believe what God is looking for and hoping to find in us is just that, real faith in Christ, so that we're the Real Thing, His faithful people, in public life and in private,

¹ Deut 8:3, Matt 4:4, Luke 4:4

² Gen 15:6, Rom 4:2-5, Rom 4:19-5:1

so that when all is revealed, when the contents of our purses are dumped out, who we say we are is who we are. You can tell a lot about someone, who they are, what they believe, how they live by what's in their purse, or their wallet, or their checkbook, or their search history. Outwardly, any one of us could appear to be one way, but inside, in what the scriptures call the inner man, we could be entirely another. Outwardly, anyone of us could seem one way, but the contents of our purses would tell another story.

For example, my mom was a feisty person. We would say in New Mexico that she was ornery. That was who she was. She came from a background of war-time suffering and family turmoil, from Catholicism that did not last beyond her college days, and while none of that excuses her orneriness, it does make her more understandable. She achieved amazing things as a researcher for the Army, and was highly regarded and beloved. And like many people, she was also angry most of the time, seething under the surface, even things were going well. And if it wasn't for the Christ-like love my father had for her, she might have ruined her life, alienating her family, friends, and colleagues.

When it comes to being ornery she was the Real Thing. When she got old and afflicted with Parkinson's, she became much less volatile, often-times sweet, mellowed with age. After my dad died, and when she could no longer drive and had to use a walker to get around, get around she would, to the market, to restaurants, and to the church that she eventually wandered back into, catching rides and taking little tiny steps with her walker. Outwardly she seemed one way, a little old lady barely five-feet tall, harmless as a fly, but inwardly she was still the Real Thing, as revealed by the contents of her purse. After she died, we were going through her personal effects in her purse, and next to a wad of hundred-dollar bills, and a new iPhone, we found a loaded nine-shot .22 pistol revolver. Of course, we did. She was the Real Thing. I don't know how she did it, but somehow, she armed herself to the teeth, for none of us would buy her gun, ever.

Anyway, the question before us is: Regarding faithfulness in Christ, do we have a loaded pistol of faith in our purses? Outwardly and inwardly are we the Real Thing? Are we the faithful people in God's Kingdom?

The Object of Faith – The Everlasting King

If you've been with us for the past couple of months, we have been going through the Book of Matthew in a sermon series entitled, "The Return of the King," and we've been doing so to accomplish two things: (1) to proclaim that Jesus of Nazareth, of the Bible, who walked the earth 2,000 years ago, was then and is today the Christ, the everlasting King, the Ruler of heaven and earth and all who are on the earth including you and me, and (2) to describe, from the Bible, what it's like to live in the here and now, now that His Kingdom is at hand.

Matthew wrote to Jewish Christians in the first century, who 30 years after Christ's death and resurrection, are a peculiar people,³ Jewish by heritage but not Jewish by religion anymore, rejected by their own people and often by their families, and out of step with the ways of this world. If you were in their shoes, if you were suffering upheaval merely because you live by

³ Titus 2:14, 1Pet 2:9

the fact that Jesus Christ is Lord, or if you are Christian in China or the Middle East now, what questions would you have? Wouldn't it be crucial to be assured that Jesus is the everlasting King? Wouldn't it be key to know how to live in this world now that His Kingdom is at hand? King and Kingdom. Is He King? Is this His Kingdom? Is He my King? Am I in His Kingdom?

Our passage is just after the Sermon on the Mount. You might recall that The Sermon on the Mount is about righteousness, the quality of being virtuous, good, and moral. And for most of His sermon, Jesus compares Kingdom righteousness against the self-righteousness of people, saying that even the highest moral standards of people are insufficient for His Kingdom, for He said, "*unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven.*"⁴ Instead Christ teaches that we must be like Him. We must be holy for He is holy, as the scriptures say.⁵ That is such a high standard that it requires a miracle for anyone to enter in – a miracle involving no less than the entire transformation of the inner man to conform in mind and heart to the mind and heart of Christ.

And the scriptures say that this miracle, salvation, comes by faith in Him. We are made righteous by faith in Him. We are acquitted of our sins by faith that the death of an innocent man, Jesus, on behalf of the whole human race, satisfies every demand of justice for the sins of the world.⁶ And then in His Kingdom, we live by faith in God to give us what we need, to give us the good gifts of His Spirit, of His heart, and of His mind. As the scriptures say:

2Cor 3:18 – ¹⁸ And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being changed into His likeness ...

The Lord God does it all. He makes us righteous. He atones for our sins. He transforms us to be like Him. He makes us fit for His Kingdom. This is salvation, and He does it all, because He is good, righteous, merciful, patient, kind, faithful, self-sacrificing, wise, powerful, willing, and especially full of love for us. The Lord God does it all, but we must agree with Him, cooperate, and be willing. We must have faith. It's like being given a car. It's mine, the car, and all I can do because of having a car. But I must use the right key to drive the car. The Lord does it all, but I must have the right way to access it all. That right way is faith. The key to the Kingdom is faith. As the scriptures say, "the righteous shall live by faith."⁷

So, our natural question would be what is faith? Just what is this key that gains us access to all that the Lord God gives? But that question can't really be answered without knowing what it means to have faith in Christ. Because faith is nothing unless it is faith in something, unless there is an object of that faith. In other words, it matters most who or what we have faith in. Here is what our passage for today begins by saying, right after the Sermon on the Mount:

Matt 7:28-8:1 – ^{7:28} And so it was, when Jesus had ended these sayings, that the people were astonished at His teaching, ^{7:29} for He taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes. ^{8:1} When He had come down from the mountain, great multitudes followed Him.

⁴ Matt 5:20

⁵ Lev 20:7, 1Pet 1:15-16

⁶ Is 52:13-53:12, Heb 2:17, Rom 3:24-25, 1 John 2:2

⁷ Hab 2:4, Rom 1:17, Gal 3:11, Heb 10:38

Astonished, it says. No one there would have missed the moment. Nor should anyone hearing now miss it. They had just heard Jesus explain the law and righteousness in the Kingdom of God, as “*one having authority*,” ... which means the authority of the Kingdom of God. Who has the authority of a kingdom but a king? So, this means they were astonished that they heard a king speak. And it would have further dawned on them, that when Jesus was explaining the law and righteousness, He did so from the symbolic place of the holy God. For the old law came from a holy God on an unapproachable mountain through Moses to the people. But Jesus ascended the mountain and took the holy place of God as the seat and source of the law. In other words, Christ isn’t your uncle with a truck. He is the source of the law, which makes Him King of the Kingdom, the Messiah long expected by the Jews. And so, of course, the astonished multitudes follow Him. But that’s not all.

Matt 8:2-4 - ² And behold, a leper came and worshiped Him, saying, “Lord, if You are willing, You can make me clean.” ³ Then Jesus put out His hand and touched him, saying, “I am willing; be cleansed.” Immediately his leprosy was cleansed. ⁴ And Jesus said to him, “See that you tell no one; but go your way, show yourself to the priest, and offer the gift that Moses commanded, as a testimony to them.”

Jesus speaks about the Kingdom like a King. The people follow Him like He’s a King, and then a leper, disfigured by disease, and living as an outcast, seeks Jesus out and asks Him to make him clean. Not heal my disease, not take away my disfigurement, but make me clean. And when Jesus healed him for all to see, Jesus did something that clearly only God can do.

The Jewish law required sequestering of lepers. They could not touch or be touched, and had to live outside town, not just to control the spread of leprosy,⁸ but also for religious reasons. The offering Jesus mentions here is a sacrifice of the innocent blood of birds and lambs for the cleansing of the bodily disfigurement of leprosy, which mirrors with the sacrifice of innocent blood for the cleansing of the spiritual disfigurement of sin.⁹ So, it is particularly poignant that the holy Christ simply touches the unclean leper and makes him clean. Christ declares by that touch, that when His Kingdom is fully here, there will be no body-disfiguring leprosy and no spirit-disfiguring sin.

Only once in the old testament is anyone ever healed of leprosy, a Syrian general, by God’s hand as he obeyed the Prophet of Israel. For a thousand years, just one recorded healing. But here as Jesus descends from the mountain, a leper sees something forgotten for a millennium, and he springs out of the shadows, with worship in his heart, and declares, “Lord, if You are willing, You can make me clean.” Lord (for You have authority) ... if You are willing (for You have the love) ... You can (for You have power) ... make me clean (for You are everlasting King). He seeks Jesus because he believes Christ is the King with power and authority over sin and leprosy. And when Jesus touches him, his belief is confirmed that the King loves him as well. The leper has loaded pistol of faith in his purse. He’s the Real Thing.

And can you even image what the next moment was like? Did this disfigured, bent over, hoarse-voiced man immediately become normal? Did the cells, the nerve endings, the blood

⁸ Lev 13:1-46

⁹ Lev 14:1-32

in capillaries, the skin layers, the worn-away bones, the contours of his unique face, just form into its perfect design, out of thin air? Normal kings don't heal people. Normal things don't heal in an instant. But when Jesus heals the leper in public, He shows there is nothing normal about it, for He Himself is the Lord God Almighty who is King, Savior, Messiah, who with a word and a touch loves the sinner and commands the physical world. Astonishing.

Matt 8:5-15 – ⁵ Now when Jesus had entered Capernaum, a centurion came to Him, pleading with Him, ⁶ saying, "Lord, my servant is lying at home paralyzed, dreadfully tormented." ⁷ And Jesus said to him, "I will come and heal him." (and skipping forward) ... ¹³ Then Jesus said to the centurion, "Go your way; and as you have believed, so let it be done for you." And his servant was healed that same hour. ¹⁴ Now when Jesus had come into Peter's house, He saw his wife's mother lying sick with a fever. ¹⁵ So He touched her hand, and the fever left her. And she arose and served them.

For now, I've skipped a discussion Jesus had with the centurion. Again, Christ does what only God can do, commanding with a word paralysis to leave, and taking away fever with a touch, reversing the natural order of decay in this dying world. And again, Christ shows what it will be like when His Kingdom is fully established, no more physical decay of the body or spiritual decay of sin, but all things will be new. With a heart for the afflicted, a touch, and a word, Christ shows He has the power, authority, and love of the King of Heaven to redeem the whole fallen world. The passage goes on.

Matt 8:16-17 – ¹⁶ When evening had come, they brought to Him many who were demon-possessed. And He cast out the spirits with a word, and healed all who were sick, ¹⁷ that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by Isaiah the prophet, saying: "He Himself took our infirmities and bore our sicknesses."

Now Christ casts out demons with just a word, and heals all who were sick, because in His Kingdom to come, there will be nothing sick, nothing demonic. And then Matthew adds a key observation, that this fulfills an old testament prophesy about the Messiah from Isaiah. There are many other fulfilled Messianic prophecies mentioned in the Book of Matthew, such as Christ is of the royal line of King David,¹⁰ that He was born of a virgin in Bethlehem, that He healed the blind, the lame, the deaf, and the mute, that He raised the dead, and that He suffered, died, and rose again.¹¹ In other words, it must be important to see how Christ fulfilled prophesy. So, a question for us is, what testimony do we need to believe Jesus is the everlasting King of heaven and earth. Here are some ways Jesus is proclaimed King.

- Eyewitness Accounts of His Miracles
- Fulfilled Old Testament Prophecy
- Jesus Speaking with Godly Authority
- Eyewitness Accounts of the Resurrection

¹⁰ The Davidic Covenant: 2Sam 7:12-13 in Matt 1:1-17.

¹¹ Fulfillment of Messianic prophecy: Micah 5:2 in Matt 2:1 born in Bethlehem; Gen 3:15 in Matt 1:1-2, 24:27 seed of the woman; Is 7:14 in Matt 1:18-25 born of a virgin; Is 42:7/61:1-2 in Matt 5:1 preach to the poor; Is 35:5-6/61:1-2 in Matt 11:5, 13:57, 4:23, 9:2-8, 9:32-34, 9:18-31, 20:29-34 heal the blind, deaf, lame, mute; Is 60:1-2 in Matt 17:1-8 appear in glory; Zech 9:9 in Matt 21:1-9 come in peace; Dan 12:2 in Matt 9:18-31 raise the dead; Is 53:4-12 in Matt 8:17, 16:21, 24:25-27, 27:11-56, 28:1-8 Christ must suffer, die, and rise again.

- Eyewitness Accounts of the Spiritual Realm like angels, voices from heaven
- Seeing the Partial Appearance of His Kingdom
- Existence of the Church (with persecution)
- Continued Existence of the Jews and Israel (with persecution)
- Experience of Answered Prayer
- Experience of a Changed Life
- Experience of the Holy Spirit
- Testimony and Witness of Others

If these testimonies are to be believed, then Christ isn't some great teacher, or a political revolutionary, or an impersonal force, or a malevolent allah, or a benevolent grandpa in the sky, or anything except the everlasting King, who has authority over everything, the power to do anything, and the love to do the right thing.

To be the faithful people of His Kingdom, the most important factor is knowing who we have faith in. Is it this Christ in the Book of Matthew, whose love is so great that he healed body and soul with a touch and word? Is it this Christ, whose love is so great that He spoke with authority about His coming righteous Kingdom? Is it this Christ, whose love is so great that He died in our place for our sins? Is it this Christ, who rescues us out of this sin-filled world of decay and death to live in His Kingdom forever? Is it this Christ, whose love is so great that by faith in Him we are made righteous before God? Is it this Christ, who rose from the dead? Name me anyone or anything else who compares. More than anything, it matters who we have faith in. It is my greatest hope that none of us will let the week go by without being fully convinced that Jesus of Nazareth is the Christ, the everlasting King of heaven and earth.

The Nature of Faith - Allegiance and Dependence

So, what does real faith in the Everlasting King look like? Let's look a little closer at the centurion, and see why he is the Real Thing, with a loaded pistol of faith in his purse.

Matt 8:5-7 - ⁵ Now when Jesus had entered Capernaum, a centurion came to Him, pleading with Him, ⁶ saying, "Lord, my servant is lying at home paralyzed, dreadfully tormented." ⁷ And Jesus said to him, "I will come and heal him."

Somehow, the centurion was convinced that Jesus is the everlasting King. The account in Luke expands the story to say he built their synagogue and was considered by the locals as a decent guy for a centurion. Maybe he was familiar with Judaism and knew of the Messiah. Maybe He saw Jesus heal the leper. Whichever way he came to it, from this conviction, he responded in two ways that reveal something fundamental in nature about real faith in Christ.

First, he had faith in Christ that involved a spirit of dependency. His faith is like children's faith in their father, a faith that results in seeking Him out and asking for help. In society, their roles are reversed with the Roman centurion commanding an occupying army and Jesus just another Jew to subdue. But the centurion takes the lower seat and places His faith in Christ's authority over everything, His power to do anything, and His love to do the right thing, and thus comes to Him with his needs. Perhaps the centurion heard what Christ said in the Sermon on the Mount, to ask, seek, and knock, and how the Heavenly Father knows

how to give good things to those who ask Him.¹² And so, he comes to Jesus like we all have to do, with the expectant faith in Christ that recognizes our weakness and needs and His strength and care. The constant prayer upon our lips should be *'I need Thee, O I need Thee; every hour I need Thee.'* The centurion had this kind of dependent faith in Christ.

Second, the centurion had a faith in Christ that involved a spirit of allegiance. His faith is like a soldier's allegiance to a King, pledging to obey every command without hesitation.

Matt 8:8-13 - ⁸ The centurion answered and said, "Lord, I am not worthy that You should come under my roof. But only speak a word, and my servant will be healed. ⁹ For I also am a man under authority, having soldiers under me. And I say to this one, 'Go,' and he goes; and to another, 'Come,' and he comes; and to my servant, 'Do this,' and he does it." ¹⁰ When Jesus heard it, He marveled, and said to those who followed, "Assuredly, I say to you, I have not found such great faith, not even in Israel!" ... ¹³ Then Jesus said to the centurion, "Go your way; and as you have believed, so let it be done for you." And his servant was healed that same hour.

Christ praises the centurion, saying, *"I have not found such great faith, not even in Israel!"* Can you imagine? Christ praises him because he absolutely understands everything is under Christ's authority. And so, the centurion states his low position before the King, saying he is unworthy for Christ to visit his house; he says he understands Christ's authority to simply command things to happen; and he sees that he too is under that authority, that if Christ said a word to him he would do it, without hesitation or complaint. Our position to Christ should be that same humble obedience, to do whatever He says to do. When His Word says, flee temptation, the soldier in allegiance to the King flees. When His Word says, forgive, the soldier in allegiance to the King forgives. And Christ praises him for it.

A praiseworthy faith of dependence and allegiance comes out only one thing: belief that Christ is the King of heaven and earth. So, where we have weaker faith, one that does not always seek Him, or does not always obey Him, that is a sign of unbelief. Perhaps we want to rule ourselves. Or we don't think Christ cares enough about me the individual. Or we think sin isn't such a big deal or it can be managed. Or there is some part of us that keeps Him at arm's length even though we've heard the Word for decades that He loves us and saves us. Or we aren't aware of our unbelief. If any of this is you, like it is me, then let us not go another day without seeking our gracious and merciful Savior in prayer to ask for His help.

The passage ends contrasting the leper and the centurion, two people who have loaded pistols of faith in their purses, with two who did not fully believe in Christ.

Matt 8:19-22 - ¹⁹ Then a certain scribe came and said to Him, "Teacher, I will follow You wherever You go." ²⁰ And Jesus said to him, "Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head." ²¹ Then another of His disciples said, "Lord, let me first go and bury my father." ²² But Jesus said to him, "Follow Me, and let the dead bury their own dead."

¹² Matt 7:6-11

The first, a scribe, sounds like a soldier pledging allegiance to a King, but he is not. He calls Jesus 'teacher,' which is not King of heaven and earth. So, Jesus turns him away pointedly saying essentially, 'I'm no mere teacher. I'm the long expected divine King from the line of David, known in the scriptures as the Son of Man.¹³ Scribe, you should know that.' And the second, a disciple, essentially puts off following Christ using the expression, 'let me first go and bury my father,' which meant maybe later, I'll think about it. It is essentially the opposite of a spirit of allegiance. So, Jesus pointedly says just what a King would say to the disobedient, 'Now is the time, for I am King.'

The Goal of Faith - The Righteous Shall Live by Faith

Alright, I'd like to end by posing the original questions again. Are we the faithful people in God's Kingdom? Do we agree that Jesus of Nazareth is the Christ, the everlasting King of heaven and earth? Do we have a spirit of dependence on Him like a child to a father? Do we have a spirit of allegiance to Him like a soldier to a King? And we who are made righteous by faith in Christ, do we live, not by guilt, not by anguish over how sinful we are, not by willful blindness, but rather by that same faith in God to give us what we need, to give us the good gifts of His Spirit, of His heart, and of His mind? Do we, because of faith in Christ, do what He says, to flee temptation, to turn away from the ways of the world, to seek Him in prayer, and in the Word, through community, and in service? **Is He really King of our lives?**

Now our faith is important. This passage has been a comparison of people responding to Christ the King with various amounts of faith in Him. But the response that we have changes as we change, as we go through trials, as we enjoy victories. We are not the constant. Our faith is not constant. Christ is the constant. Our faith is important but Christ's constant love for us is more important. His love never changes. He loved us before we walked the earth. No one will ever love us as much as He does. In fact, everything Christ does is love, dying on the cross, explaining the Kingdom, giving us His Word and His Spirit, giving us eternal life in Him, crediting our little faith as righteousness before Him, healing the afflicted, praising allegiance, rebuking unbelief, changing us into His likeness, giving us good things, and walking with us in our sufferings of this world. Everything Christ does is relentless, joyous, permanent, active, constant love. And it's His love for us that causes our faith in Him to grow. Faith in Christ is simply our response to believing He is the Everlasting King of our lives.

* * *

Alright, I would like to revisit the story of Jesus healing the leper. As we've looked at the miracles, one question keeps coming to me. Why doesn't Jesus heal everyone of everything now like He did back then? The passage says that back then, He healed 'all who were sick,' lepers, paralytics, the insane, and later we'll read, the blind, the lame, the deaf, the dumb, even a dead girl, and a mother's dead only son. And yet now, as we seek Him, and ask Him, and knock on His door, with the same dependency and allegiance of a real faith to heal us all, sometimes He does and sometimes He doesn't.

¹³ Dan 7:13-14

We're going to further address this question in the weeks ahead, but for today I would like to frame it like this. I understand that by healing the afflicted, Jesus is proclaiming Himself to be the King with authority over everything, even the physical world. And I also see the healing, greater than a restoration of the dying body, is the salvation of the eternal soul from sin. But why does He only establish His Kingdom partially now, to save sinners now, with the complete redemption of the fallen world to come another day?

With what little I can know about anything, if you were to ask me what I thought of His partial Kingdom, I would in an unguarded moment say, 'I wish there was no more suffering, death, decay, and sin and troubles in this world now, as it will be in the next,' to which He says, 'dear son, that's not My plan.' I don't see it, but when I contemplate how He healed the leper, maybe a glimmer of understanding of His better plan cracks through.

It's perhaps there in the passage where it says Jesus touched him. The disease is dreadful. The nerves die, so the poor soul cannot feel pain. Normal things that would cause us to flinch away just happen to them, and they eventually lose their body to cuts, scrapes, infection, burns, scarring, often becoming blind, hairless, without hands, or feet, or noses, with disfigured faces. And yet what is even worse is becoming someone so monstrous in appearance that no one ever wants to touch them. And into this Jesus touches him, saying, "I am willing; be cleansed." If you've seen the movie, 'Risen,' one of the best films about Christ I've seen, there is a moment with the healing of a leper that just catches my breath. It's this one. In a minute, the leper will be healed. It's miraculous, and thrilling, and full of Christ's love for the man, whose now handsome bearded face looks back at Jesus. But this is the moment just before, when Jesus touches him, holds him, touching his disfigured face that no one has touched for decades. This moment of healing the soul is far, far better than the moment to come of healing the body. For at this moment, he received Jesus Himself, forever.

Perhaps the best love we receive from Christ is when He mourns with us in our suffering and affliction. Perhaps the best gift we receive is when He holds on to us as His own righteous people while we roll on through this unfriendly world. Perhaps the best miracle of all is when the everlasting King of heaven and earth simply gives Himself to us. One glorious day all will be made new in His Kingdom. But for now, perhaps this is better.

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